

March 11, 2015

Dear Senator Moore, Representative Abercrombie and Committee of Human Services,

My name is Cara Bowles. I am a resident of Gales Ferry, CT and a Preschool Teacher at Riverfront Children's Center. I am writing on behalf of myself, as well as the numerous early childhood educators struggling to make ends meet.

I decided at the age of eight that I would be an educator. This decision, made as a third grader, was based on the person who was then my biggest role model, my teacher. Coincidentally, my mother reminds me often that I spent the first two months of that academic year crying about how harsh, and unfair my teacher was. I began the year frustrated with her strict regiment, and mindset that a class must act as a team, and I hated being penalized when I personally was not meeting the expectations. As the year progressed, I learned that simply going through the motions of appropriate behavior myself was not enough. I learned to coach my peers, the value of honesty and trust, and the reward of helping others. I ended the year inspired, and awe struck at the class we had become, the accomplishments we had made, and the love that I had for that first year teacher. I always imagined myself being just like her.

20 years later, I am a CT certified teacher with a 30,000 dollar loan looming over my head, living paycheck to paycheck. I double majored in college, at a state school not wanting to acquire too much debt, and worked as a resident assistant to play it extra safe. I worked hard, graduating in five years, and desperately searched for my first public school teaching experience. Getting hired, in today's job market, where few can afford to retire and educators positions are constantly being cut, took two years. But alas, after a long wait, I was ecstatic, I had accepted my first public school teaching position.

Teaching in the public school was nothing like I had imagined. None of my many practicum experiences could have prepared me for the disappointment I felt for my preschoolers, as they were rushed to adhere to the existing curriculum, assessed and tested, again, and again, and forced to move forward regardless of individual content knowledge. Despite my student's progress, individually, my one year contract ended, my mentor was bumped into my position, and I was made to feel self-doubt in my teaching abilities. At that point I realized I did not have the heart to apply to another public school teaching position. I began a search, to find somewhere that I could teach whose mission statement was similar to my own.

This is when I found Riverfront Children's Center. I knew ten minutes into my interview that this was the place I wanted to teach at. I had a candid conversation, about my frustrations with the public school system, my beliefs in looking at each student as an individual and maximizing their strengths, as well as pushing them to achieve their fullest potential. I was received well, and upon employment I quickly learned that this center is unbelievable in heart, and ability to serve early childhood children. I have never met so many educators under one roof, who believe in their own personal growth, as well as building each child up to be the best they can be. I have never met so many people, willing to give a job so much heart both on and off the clock, without pay wage incentives.

I work in the early childhood field shaping, and educating young minds, and I earn an annual income that is less than most food servers. My student loan and car payment take up one of my biweekly paychecks. My other check must cover rent, utilities, car insurance, my phone bill, gas, and groceries. As you can imagine, I do not purchase much in the groceries department. If I did not live with my partner, to split these costs, I would be forced to live with my parents. I cannot justify having a costly wedding, or having children in the near future. It is difficult to begin a life, so to speak.

I work a second job to establish a savings in case something were to happen to me. I am an assistant swim coach to a high school team. I work forty hours a week at Riverfront, and go straight from my eight hour shift to the pool. I get home after eight pm every day for six months out of the year. I see my partner on Sundays, or when I am asleep, if that counts, and I choose to utilize many Sundays to enhance my curriculum or prepare my weekly activities.

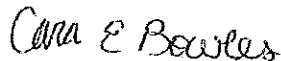
In the year and a half that I have worked at Riverfront we have lost valuable employees. The reason for this always seems to be the same, they needed greater pay. I fear that in the near future, I will have to leave for the same reasons, accepting a job in the public school system again, despite feeling as though Riverfront Children's Center has a better program for preschool aged children, that is developmentally appropriate and focuses on the individual child.

Our center has been lucky to have acquired the individuals we have working in it. Other centers I have worked at have not. When the early childhood education community is unable to pay their educators for their experiences and personal education, then we lack qualified staff. We become a daycare, rather than a development center. If centers could retain qualified staff it not only offers better learning experiences, but it provides consistency for children. It would give children a trusting and nurturing environment which young children so desperately need. It is more common than ever before for children to attend early childhood programs, because more parents than ever before must work. Wouldn't it be beneficial to everyone if these children receive the best care/education possible?

We need to start treating the early childhood years as important as research proves they are, and that starts with paying individuals who are qualified.

Thank you for paying attention to these matters,

Cara Bowles



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